

BOOK REVIEW

SHOW PEOPLE SCULPTED

A Catalogue of 18th and 19th Century Figurines Depicting Magic Lantern and Peepshow Performers

Mike Smith

LMH Smith, 2017

hb, 84 pages

Mike Smith has produced a sumptuously illustrated book of figurines drawing on his own extensive collection, those of several other members and other sources. The figurines depicted are mainly porcelain but also include examples in earthenware, terracotta, bronze, spelter (zinc alloy), ivory and wood. The great majority were made between the middle of the 18th century and 1900. The book does not claim to be comprehensive but does contain a wide and wonderful range of different examples with each described in the informative captions.

David Robinson sets the scene in his introduction, starting with a summary of the development of porcelain figurines in 18th century Europe. He focusses in particular on the Meissen series *Les Cris de Paris* produced in the 1750s that included a magic lantern showman (page 19). While the showman himself, like others in the series, is "impossibly exquisite", the lantern he carries is "painstakingly realistic".

This was the first in a line of such figurines, many illustrated in this book.

The reason suggested by David Robinson for the popularity in creating figurines depicting magic lantern and peepshow performers is that the producers took their cue from artists and printmakers who had already found the travelling 'Savoyards' a profitable subject.



For some of the figurines, Mike has been able to show the prints from which they are taken alongside, adding a further layer of interest. This also explains how different factories came to produce recognisably the same figurines, based on the same original prints.



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One of the main inspirations for the peepshow groups was a detail from a 1740 print *Foire de campagne* by Charles Nicolas Cochin, taken from a painting by François Boucher (pages 62 and 63) – an artist at the heart of the rococo movement so popular at the time that gave rise to the impossibly wholesome appearance and incongruous attire of the show people in the early figurines. Later figurines in the book show more realism and David Robinson picks out a group from



Helmut Wälde's collection as a particularly good example. This depicts a weary performer asleep by his peepshow while two boys take the opportunity for a free peek (page 82).

The book is beautifully produced and will be a welcome addition to the collection of anyone with an interest in how magic lanterns, peepshows and their show people were portrayed in other artistic media.



Copies of the book are only available direct from Mike. Order by email to Mike at: kime1944@gmail.com. Price £25.00 including postage anywhere worldwide.